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The Parochialization of Memory: Commemorations of Rotuma's Colonial and Missionary Past

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> The six months from January 11 to July 9 I spent on the island of Rotuma making a study of the pre-European history, the customs, and the race of the native inhabitants. To cover this work fully, it was necessary to live in each of the seven districts into which the island is divided, for each had its own history and especially its own legends which it regarded as its own particular property and which would only be divulged by the people to whom it belonged.
>
> Gordon MacGregor, 1932

When people live together in small communities they develop, through time, semiotic codes that structure their communications with one another, particularly the narratives that relate to their shared histories. In small communities that have had stable populations over long periods of time, and have been relatively uninfluenced by intrusion, semiotic codes can become so powerful that they come to dominate historical narratives to the point that we, as ethnographers, may lose confidence in their validity as chronicles. Under such circumstances even recent history may glide into legend or myth, i.e., narratives oriented more toward unchanging structural veracity than the accurate reporting of historical episodes.

Such was the case in Rotuma, we believe, prior to Western intrusion. Rotuman myths and legends were structured by dominating semiotic codes that included directional oppositions, kinship relationships, gender, food types, colors, and character-reflecting names (see Howard 1985:44-47). These codes were generative in the sense that they produced a range of acceptable variations for particular stories depending on settings, a storyteller's relation to relevant characters, places and events, time constraints, and the like. But the semiotic codes acted as redundant filters that served to preserve stories within definite limits.

That was then, but what about now? How does the Rotuman historical imagination operate after two centuries of exposure to other cultures—Fijian, western Polynesian, and European (first in its colonial incarnation, later in its various cosmopolitan guises)? Most Rotumans now live in urban centers in Fiji, Australia, or New Zealand. Most are bi- or tri-lingual, speaking English and/or Fijian in addition to Rotuman. Such exposure, such cultural diversification, surely affects a semiotic code's structural power. Indeed, one might argue that Rotumans today are confronted with multiple semiotic systems, or synthesized codes of great variation. One might expect code switching not only between languages, but between semiotic structures as well.

What we intend to demonstrate in this paper, through the example of recent commemorations of Rotuma’s cession to Great Britain and Christian missionization, is that despite macropolitical pressures to construct history in accordance with Fiji's national interests, important aspects of the Rotuman mythic code remain strong enough to color historical narratives in distinctive ways. In particular, codes based on oppositions that have been sustained or reinforced by historical

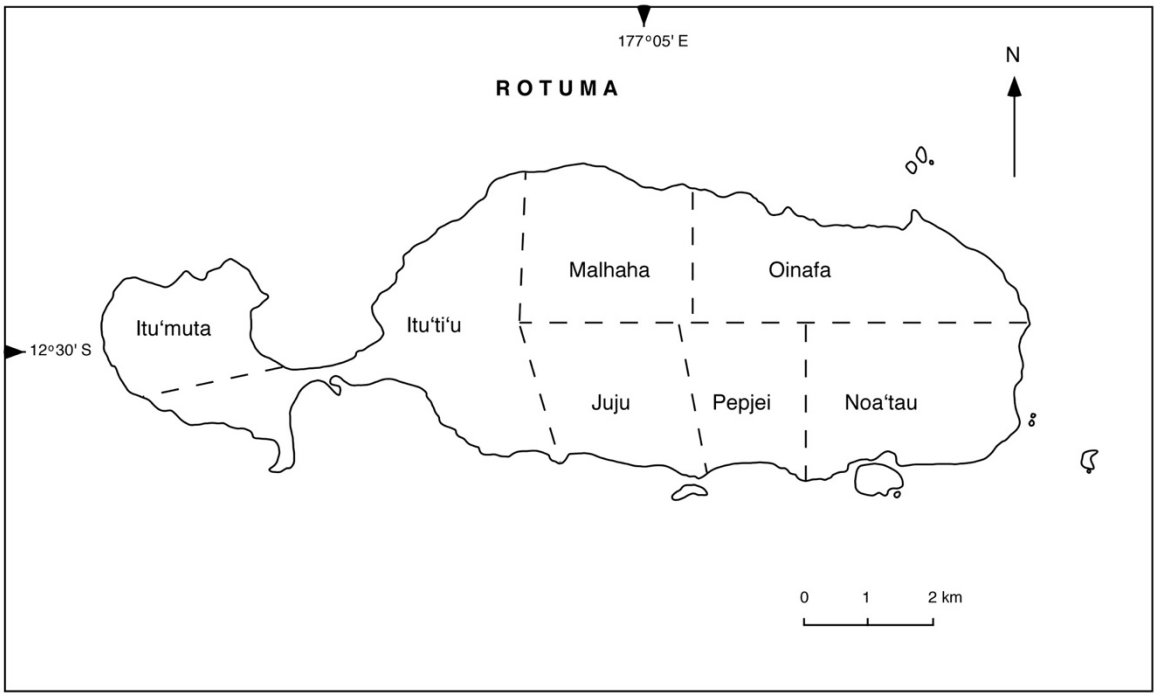
trajectories within the Rotuman community continue to exert a powerful patterning influence on memorialization of historical events. Primary among these are codes related to a sense of place and kinship.

The importance of these codes for the construction of narratives lie in the ways they parochialize memory, i.e., privilege information restricted in scope and confined to a specific place and/or set of kinsmen (particularly immediate ancestors).

Direction and Place in Rotuman Semiotics

Directional Oppositions in Rotuman Myth

The island of Rotuma is approximately thirteen kilometers long by five kilometers wide, situated along an east-west axis. It is shaped like a torso, with the smaller western end joined by a narrow isthmus (see map).



Rotuman myths utilized a semiotic code based on this geography, dividing the island into three segments along its east-west axis, while incorporating a north-south division. That portion of the island west of the isthmus, called Fa‘u (back), is associated with people of the land (non-chiefs). This contrasts with the remainder of the island, termed Mua (front). (The west end of the island is also referred to as *sio* [down] and the east end as *se‘e* [up].) The eastern segment is further divided into an end and middle section. The end section includes the districts of Oinafa and Noa‘tau, which, being at the extreme eastern part of the island, are most closely associated with stranger-chiefs (Sahlins 1981). The midsection includes Malhaha, Fag‘uta (comprising the current districts of Juju and Pepjei), and the portion of Itu‘ti‘u east of the isthmus. In the myths, contrasts between the extremities of the island (e.g., between Oinafa/Noatau and Fa‘u) imply strong opposition, and contrasts between either end and the midsection a somewhat weaker form.

Another opposition is between north and south, north being associated with chieftainship, south with common status. This opposition is dramatized in some versions of a founding legend. In these accounts, the legendary Raho "plants" Rotuma by pouring earth from two separate baskets. The first pouring is from a ceremonial presentation basket at Malhaha on the north side of the island where Raho established his chiefly home *(nohoag gagaja)*; the second pouring is from a common basket tipped out in Pepjei on the south side of the island where Raho's seat of government *(nohoag pure)* was established (see Churchward 1937:109). Whereas east was used to signify externally derived chieftainship, north is a marker for indigenously derived chiefs. The north-south distinction is only used in reference to the middle part of the island, exclusive of Fa‘u to the west and Oinafa and Noa‘tau to the east. The exclusion of the extreme

east and west ends implies a weaker form of opposition. Further elaborations were possible by locating persons or events on or near the coast *(ufaga),* signifying chieftainship, or inland *(loga),* signifying people of the land. This may be a strong or weak form of opposition, depending on context, and allowed for the expression of additional subtleties.

By locating individuals and events in specific localities, Rotumans were thus able to construct a range of strong to weak oppositions between chiefs and commoners. Because of the importance of this geographic code, Rotuman myths were peppered with place-names corresponding to events and activities.

Place in Rotuman Social Life

It is difficult to overemphasize the importance of place in Rotuman social life. Even today, people routinely ask one another where they are going and where they have come from, though the answers are likely to be conventionally vague, such as *"se ‘elsio"* (westward), *"se ‘else‘e"* (eastward), *"se ufa"* (inland), etc. Every small parcel of land is named and referred to by name in conversation. Houses are built on foundations *(fuag ri)* or on land associated with foundations (Rensel 1997), and families are often referred to by *fuag ri* names rather than personal names (until recently there were no family names, each person having a unique name). Each hamlet (*ho‘aga)* had its own local deity in the pre-Christian era (Gardiner 1898:466), and ancestral spirits are still associated with places, so people are loathe to die away from their home territory. If someone is buried elsewhere on the island, usually in their spouse's locality in order to be buried with children who grew up there, relatives bring baskets of sand from a beach near the person's home to spread on the grave, symbolically bringing home to the deceased.

Kinship in Historical Narration

The observation that kinship is central to historical narration is trivial in the sense that it is probably true in all pre-urban societies. Kinship is both a code that structures myths and a tangible concern that orders social interaction, access to resources and privileges, and power relations. However, it can have rather different implications for constructing social histories in the sense that people can choose to be inclusive (finding or constructing links to a wide array of ancestral figures) or exclusive (limiting links to immediate ancestors). Our argument is that Rotumans tend to emphasize exclusiveness in historical narration, which, when combined with spatial exclusiveness, results in the parochialization of commemorative events.

On Rotuma, narratives of all kinds require locating events and actors in place, as Gordon MacGregor's quote that began this essay suggests, as well as in kinship context in order for them to be intelligible. Rotuman history is embedded in place-names, chiefly titles, and family epithets *(te samuga),* all of them specifically located in geographical as well as social space. It was quite striking to us when we attempted to investigate Rotuman historical narratives that people revealed only vague conceptions of the island's general history, or that of the Rotuman people as a whole. Instead consultants focused their attention on family lineages and specific places on the island (Howard 1993:90-93).

Histories and Anniversaries

In the past two decades, three major celebrations were held on Rotuma commemorating historical events: the day Rotuma was officially ceded to Great Britain (May 13, 1881), the day the Wesleyan missionary John Williams landed on Rotuma (November 12,

1839), and the day the first Catholic mass was celebrated on Rotuma (December 25, 1847). We were present at the commemorations of the latter two events, but missed the cession centennial in 1981. All three generated commemorative booklets, and we rely on these as one important source of data.

The commemorative booklet for the cession celebration presented a geographical and historical overview, selected legends and reflections on Rotuma's future. It is printed in both English and Rotuman. The geographical and historical materials are drawn from published sources and provide sketches of population change, early European visitations, events leading to cession, and an account of the flag raising. Additional articles trace changes in education, religion, health, traditional chieftainship, commerce and industry, and government administration under the British and post-colonial Fiji. For the most part it glorifies the colonial era and the "progress" that had been made in each area. The foregoing articles, and the legends, are all anonymously authored, but three speculative articles on the future of the island have bylines. These express a confidence in continuing development while drawing attention to problems and needs. One author refers to Rotuma as "Fiji's Cinderella," its needs neglected because of its small size and isolation, but he opines that "the future of Rotuma is bright in that Cinderella will eventually be invited to the ball and will meet and marry the handsome prince" (Wesley 1981:17). In this essay, the handsome prince turns out metaphorically to be relatives abroad who will "channel their riches to the island." The prediction was prophetic of increasing remittances, although whether or not Cinderella and the prince are living happily ever after is a matter of continuing debate.

The main ceremony at the commemoration was the unveiling of a monument at the site where the Deed of Cession was signed, in

the village of Motusa. At the time of the celebration, in 1981, Rotumans were generally accepting of their incorporation into the nation of Fiji, which gained its independence in 1970, but many were skeptical that the government would be responsive to their interests, as the Cinderella metaphor suggests. It should be noted that the primary focus of the commemoration was the relationship between Rotuma and Great Britain, and only secondarily between Rotuma and Fiji.

Following the coups of 1989, and particularly the second coup, after which Fiji declared itself a republic and left the Commonwealth, this distinction became critical. Inspired by Henry Gibson, a part-Rotuman man living in New Zealand who took the title Lagfatmaro and claimed to be "King of Rotuma," a group of Rotuman dissidents refused to accept the Rotuma Council's decision to remain with Fiji. They argued that the compact between Rotuma and Fiji was nullified when Fiji left the Commonwealth since the agreement hinged upon Rotuma's cession contract with Great Britain. Gibson presented the argument in testimony to the Fiji Constitution Review Commission on 12 September, 1995:

> The people [Rotumans] most strongly oppose and resent fervently any idea whatsoever, to include or cede the island of Rotuma to Fiji.
>
> It is their belief the the Deed of Cession between Rotuma and Great Britain in the year 1881, is still a binding contract between our nation [*sic*].
>
> There has been no consensus agreement by the people of Rotuma to alter or refute the Deed of Cession since that date... It must be remembered that Rotuma existed as a separate entity well before the great Fijian migration right down to the British annexation...

> The "so-called Rotuma Island Council" is not the legal authority over the island and people of Rotuma....
>
> According to Rotuman tradition there is no such body known as a Rotuma Council. They are selected or elected chiefs, not as a council. During Rotuma's annexation to Great Britain, this body known as the Rotuma Island Council was then formed. Now in our opinion that body is legal as far as Her Majesty's representative remains in Fiji ... when he terminated his office ... that terminate[d] the so called body known as the Rotuma Island Council. (Fiji Constitution Review Commission 1995, 111—112, 121)

This version of Rotuman history is contested by those who regard the Rotuma Island Council as having legitimacy beyond the Deed of Cession. Since the Council decided to remain with Fiji following the coups, this is a crucial point of historical interpretation. Gibson's argument implied that with Fiji's severance of ties to the Commonwealth, Rotuma automatically acquired independent status and the Council had no legitimate authority to decide otherwise.

In an important sense, Gibson's argument involved the parochialization of memory. He maintained that the chiefs only have authority in their own districts and that they cannot make binding decisions without first consulting lineage elders and the people of their district. He specifically referred to concerns over rules governing landownership as a basic distinction between Fijian and Rotuman customs. From this one can read a commitment not only to Rotuma's autonomy, but also to the autonomy of districts within Rotuma and to kin groups within districts.

We can see in this debate at least three levels of historical framing. One is a macro-level that links Rotuma to Fiji and serves to integrate Rotuma into a larger state polity. At an intermediate level is an historical consciousness that treats Rotuma as a singular entity with a common history and destiny. At the most parochial level are concerns for specific locales on Rotuma and for the roles played by specific ancestral figures.

Apropos of this latter consideration, a number of Gibson's followers justified their dissidence on the grounds that a lineal ancestor had been district chief at the time of cession and had signed the Deed of Cession. They regarded Rotuma's leaving the Commonwealth to remain part of Fiji as in violation of a sacred trust, and presented themselves as faithful representatives of their ancestors' will. Indeed, the chiefs who signed the Deed of Cession occupy a special role in Rotuman collective memory. They serve as anchored reference points for contemporary political issues (see below), in part, we believe, because cession provides one of the few historical reference points that is pan-Rotuman in scope.

Missionization and Semantic Reconfiguration

The man credited with initiating the Christianization of Rotuma is John Williams, who called there on November 12, 1839, on his ill-fated voyage to Erromanga. In response to pleas from two Rotuman chiefs, Fursepaoa and Tokainiua, who was head chief of Oinafa district, Williams left two Samoan teachers (Wood 1978:117). They took up residence in Oinafa, where they were under the protection of Fursepaoa and Tokainiua. The Samoans were unsuccessful in converting Rotumans to Wesleyanism, in large measure because they failed to learn the Rotuman language. Not until the arrival of four Tongan teachers, in 1841, was

progress reported. The Tongans, like their predecessors, took up residence in Oinafa village under the care of Tokainiua, who had visited Tonga in the interim and embraced Christianity (Wood 1978:119). Eventually a European missionary, the Reverend William Fletcher, was assigned to Rotuma, arriving with his wife in 1864.

The first Roman Catholic missionaries to arrive on Rotuma were two Marist priests, Fathers Verne and Villien, and a Marist brother, Lucien. They performed the first mass on Rotuma on Christmas Day 1846 at Vaitoka in the village of Oinafa. Fr. Villien was replaced in 1851 by Fr. Farier, and the following year Fr. Verne was replaced by Fr. Sage. The two priests left for Futuna in 1853, claiming persecution of their converts by non-Christian chiefs (Wood 1978:120). The Catholics did not return until 1868, by which time much of the island's population had converted to Wesleyanism. The two French priests who were sent to Rotuma, Frs. Dezert and Trouillet, established a mission on the south side of the island at Voilala, which was later renamed Sumi, as recounted in the souvenir magazine published in 1996 for the 150th anniversary of the Catholic mission’s arrival. They were offered protection by Gagaj Riamkau, the chief of Fag‘uta. Riamkau had not converted to Wesleyanism and was the head of an alliance that had fought the northern districts periodically prior to missionization.

By 1871 most of Rotuma had converted to Christianity, with the districts of Noa‘tau, Oinafa, Malhaha, and Itu‘muta mostly Wesleyan, the districts of Juju and Pepjei mostly Catholic. In Itu‘ti‘u, however, the largest district, an enclave of unconverted Rotumans lived side by side with Wesleyans and Catholics. The chief of Itu‘ti‘u, Tauragtoak, was the only district chief who was not yet committed to Christianity.

As the only remaining unconverted chief, Tauragtoak took responsibility for perpetuating the role of *sau* and accommodated a *sau* in the village of Savlei. The *sau* was a key figure in the pre-Christian religion, the center of various fertility rituals (see Howard 1985; Ladefoged 1995). When some Wesleyan subchiefs refused to donate provisions to support the *sau,* Tauragtoak declared that he would force them into submission. He asked support from Catholics in his district and received it, whereupon he prepared to press the issue.

Thus, on the evening of 27 February 1871, Father Joseph Trouillet baptized recently converted Catholics late into the night, sanctifying them for the expected battle (Histoire Sumi 1886—1881). At nearby Motusa, Rotuman Wesleyans spent the night fortifying their houses and constructing a defensive wall of earth. The following morning after Mass the combined Catholic and unconverted forces set out to engage the Wesleyans.[1] Soon the Wesleyans were routed from their positions and fell back, but reinforcements sent from nearby districts turned the battle in favor of the Wesleyans, who forced Tauragtoak and his allies to flee to Fag‘uta. In the aftermath a large number of “heathens,” along with some Catholics, converted to Wesleyanism, and Albert became the new chief of Itu‘ti‘u.

Another war took place between the two sides in 1878, resulting in the death of Riamkau and the defeat of the Catholics. It also led the chiefs of Rotuma to petition the British for cession, in part because of perceived threats of French intervention (for a detailed account of Rotuma's "religious wars," see Howard and Kjellgren 1994).

Representations of these conflicts by the English Wesleyans, French Catholics, and Rotumans differed markedly. The French priests, writing to their superiors, consistently portrayed themselves and their converts as "martyrs." Those who died in

the war of 1878, six men in all, were declared martyrs, including Riamkau, who had converted back to Wesleyanism prior to the war but rejoined the Catholics at the last moment. Wesleyan accounts of the wars are sparse by comparison; the conflicts are portrayed as little more than mild disturbances of the missionization process. Their accounts read more like the account books of an emerging corporation than of a sacred mission, with the number of converts per pounds spent as the bottom line. While the Catholic Church explicitly ordered their missionaries to convert the people and live amongst them while following the principles of "poverty, celibacy, and obedience" (van der Grijp 1993:146), for Protestants the central notion was that "Christianity and civilization advanced hand in hand" (Horne 1904:40). Their mission was not only to gain converts but also to Westernize, to make the rest of the world more like England and, perhaps most importantly, to have the mission pay for itself in the process.

It is important for what follows to point out a language anomaly that occurred during missionization. In seeking a term for God, the Methodists chose the word *'aitu,* which might be translated as "bound spirit" (one responsive to prayers and rituals), while they translated the word *'atua* (or unbound spirit—which includes ancestral and free-roaming ghosts, anomalous animals, etc.) as "devils" (see Howard 1996:122-125 and Hereniko 1995:107-120 for a fuller explication of these terms).

On the other hand, the French priests, coming from Futuna, adopted the word *'atua* for God, drawing from the Futunan language with which they were familiar. Catholics came to use *'aitu,* or the Anglicized term *tevolo,* in reference to devils or evil spirits. Thus the wars of 1871 and 1878 were framed as between *'aitu* and *'atua* worshippers during a prolonged period of

animosity between Methodists and Catholics that lasted until the late 1960s.

The Methodist Commemoration, 1989

The Methodist Church is one of the main nongovernmental links between Rotuma and Fiji. Indeed, when emphasizing the ties between the two, advocates of unity generally refer to the name "The Methodist Church of Fiji and Rotuma" as indicative of a common history. Some Fijians and Rotumans have even gone so far as to invoke this nomenclature to justify classifying Rotumans as *taukei* (children of the land [Fiji]) in contrast to people of foreign origins (Indians, Europeans, Chinese, other Pacific Islanders, etc.).

Planning for the 150th anniversary of the Methodist church embroiled Rotumans in disputes over where and when the ceremonies would take place. Eventually the celebration was appropriated by the district of Oinafa, where John Williams landed, and more specifically by the village of Oinafa, although his actual landing site was in neighboring Sauhata village. Furthermore, the commemorative booklet produced for the occasion, while providing extracts of church history from published sources that treated Rotuma as a unity, devote considerable space to glorifying Oinafa's historical legacy (including a listing of the accomplishments of local emigrants).

The Catholic Commemoration, 1996

The Catholic commemoration more strongly emphasized Rotuma's ties to Fiji. The president, Ratu Kamisese Mara, and his wife were invited and ceremonially received (although Mara claimed he came primarily as a Catholic and only secondarily as head of state), and governmental ministers were invited among other

distinguished guests. The affair was presided over by the Archbishop of Fiji, and a number of priests from Fiji attended.

Like the booklet prepared by Methodists for their commemoration, the Catholic commemorative booklet was composed mainly of extracts from published sources celebrating the accomplishments of the early missionaries. It also included pictures and brief histories of the individual churches, identifying them with their localities.

Perhaps most interesting, however, was the fact that a segment of the Catholic community on Rotuma refused to participate in the main celebration at all. They reacted angrily to the Church's decision to drop the word *'atua* for God in favor of *'aitu,* thus eliminating the opposition that resulted from importing the Futunan concept.[2] The dissident group also refused to participate in church services in which the term *'aitu* was used. For a while the priest performed Mass separately for them using the word *'atua,* but this concession was withdrawn by the Church hierarchy prior to the 1996 commemoration. The dissidents then held church services on their own and decided to also hold their own commemoration of the anniversary. Their event took place several days prior to the main event and involved a pilgrimage to the "tomb of the martyrs" in Sumi cemetery, where six Catholics who had been killed in the 1878 war are buried in a common grave. Descendants of the deceased took turns placing wreaths and flowers on the grave amidst much picture taking and speech making. At the accompanying feast, speeches and *maka* (dances with lyrics composed for the occasion) focused on the sacrifices of the martyred ancestors and expressed a determination to hold out to the bitter end.

Conclusion

The historiography of the three commemorative events thus seems to be structured by three separate levels of concern: (1) a nation-building concern that links Rotuma politically and economically to Fiji, emphasizing a common history and associative bonds; (2) a concern for Rotuman culture as an objectified unity, emphasizing Rotuma's unique customs and traditions; and (3) a parochial concern emphasizing local events and limited sets of ancestors. The first two levels are clearly overlays upon the more enduring third level and represent the interests of Rotuman emigrants to Fiji for whom integration of Rotuma with the outside world, and particularly Fiji, is a matter of self-interest. What is remarkable, however, is the degree to which parochialism continues to influence historical constructions, not only among residents on the island but among emigrants as well.

Notes

1 Trouillet to Poupinel, 10 March 1871, Catholic Diocesan Office, Suva, Fiji [PMB Reel 428].

2 The Catholic Church also committed to changing its orthography from the French-inspired orthography of the early priests to the one developed by Methodist missionary-linguist C. M. Churchward. At one time, Rotuman had three orthographies (French-based, English-based, and Churchward's); the move by the Catholic Church hierarchy to adopt Churchward's was both a decision to adopt a more accurate orthography and an ecumenical gesture aimed at improving relations between the two religions.

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